# BIOGRAPHY

Saskia Rao-de Haas is a world-renowned virtuoso cellist, composer, cultural entrepreneur and educationalist from the Netherlands. She was trained as a Western cellist from a young age onwards, but changed direction when she came in touch with Indian music in 1993. She is known as a master performer of Indian classical music and is hailed as the creator of a new instrument: the Indian cello. Flute Maestro Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia speaks of his disciple Saskia as “someone who has been taught by God.” According to him, “everybody should listen to her music”.

Critics and audiences alike have praised her for artistic depth and technical virtuosity. Saskia has performed at all the most prestigious festivals for Indian classical music such as the Doverlane Conference in Kolkota, ‘Legends of India’ in New Delhi, ‘Saptak’ festival in Ahmdehabad’‘Vasanta Habbha’ in Bangalore, the ‘Maihar’ festival, ‘Haridas sangeet samelan’ in Lucknow. She is the first female non-Indian artist to have performed at the prestigious Doverlane Music conference in Kolkata. Her path-breaking composition “Mukhani” performed by the Ragamala String Quartet that she founded was premiered at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. She has toured extensively through North America, Europe and Asia, performing at the world’s leading concert halls and festivals, be it Kennedy Center, the cello biennale in Amsterdam, the new directions cello festival in the US, Europelia in Brussels, Musee Guimet in Paris, Singapore or the Bharatiya Vidya bhavan in London. As a composer, she is eminent at bridging the Western and Indian classical music traditions. She composed music for Patmabushan dr Sonal Mansingh, Raga Mala dance-company, various theatre productions, documentaries and music ensembles. Since the last 5 years, she also performs with her son, 16 -year- old pianist Ishaan. They created music around compositions of Philip Glass, Eric Satie, Sufi Hidayath Khan. Since the last 2 years the entire family shares the stage as ‘the Rao Trio’. They conceived programs for the Austrian Embassy in Delhi around Mozart and around composer Heitor Villalobos for the Brazilian Embassy. They also perform Indian Classical music together.

Saskia was born in the Netherlands and started her cello lessons at the age of 9 with late cello maestro Tibor de Machula. She fell in love with the instrument and his inspiring lessons. Her beloved ‘Uncle Tibi’ passed away when she was only 14 years old and she continued learning from his wife, Wieb de Machula. She studied musicology at the University of Amsterdam with her final research thesis on notation systems in Indian music. She also studied Cello at the Conservatory of Rotterdam where she learned from at first Kaustav Ray and later with Pt Hariprasad Chaurasia. According to her Guru’s adate to ‘find a style that is not the Bansuri or Sarangi or Violin, but the Cello ‘Ang’ (style0”, she learned from maestro’s Pt. D.K. Dattar, Pt Deepak Chaudhuri and Dr Sumati Mutatkar among others. She feels grateful for the lessons she received from these great artists.

In 1999, she moved to Delhi to live the life of an Indian musician. She had her debut concert in New Delhi at the India International Centre in 2000 and since then there has been no looking back.

In 2011, Saskia was awarded the’ Pandit Jasraj Award for cross-cultural understanding’ by the Maestro himself at a scintillating ceremony in Hyderabad. In 2014 she was awarded the ‘Delhi Ratna’ award for her contribution to Indian classical music. She has been awarded since with many more awards for her contribution to music and music education.

In 2015, she performed for India’s PM, N. Modi and Germany’s chancellor A. Merkel a composition conceived by Pt Shubhendra and herself. In 2014 Saskia has developed another instrument: the electro acoustic Indian Cello, which she has called ‘Veena d’Amore’. This is a smaller, electro acoustic cello built for her by French builder Alexandre Letellier.

She co- founded the Shubhendra and Saskia Rao foundation to promote the joy and benefits that Indian classical music can bring to children. She created the first complete music curriculum for Indian music for young children based on 6 storybooks. Over 30,000 children, 100 music teachers and many schools have already benefitted from the ‘Sangeet4All’ music framework. The books Saskia has written help children to experience the importance of having music in their lives and the transformative power of the Indian classical music traditions. The patented Swartarang is heralded as a new era in Indian music education. Saskia believes in the transformative power of music, especially for the education of children and youth. Saskia lives in New Delhi with her life partner and partner on stage, Pandit Shubhendra Rao and their 16-year-old pianist son Ishaan. Together they perform as ‘the Rao Trio’.

SASKIA IN THE NEWS: *Her cello music truly speaks what cannot be expressed, soothes the mind and gives it rest, heals the heart and makes it whole, flows from heaven to the soul….* **BITS, Pilani**

*Saskia’s control over the finger board and bow appeared to be total... her varying speeds in the Jhala were scintillating****,* Indian express, Hyderabad**

*With great virtuosity and artistic depth Saskia Rao-de Haas introduces a new sound in the world of Indian classical music which is received worldwide with great enthusiasm by critics and audiences alike,* **Documentary for Dutch radio**

*Sitting on the floor like any other Indian musician, Saskia started the concert with the rag Bheempalas. The instrument tone was mellow and pleasant. She delineated the raga with due stress on the pivotal swaras. The phrases became vibrant, as the tabla joined and the sound polished and fluid,* **Deccan Herald, Bangalore**

*Music knows no boundaries. One such was the performance of Saskia de Haas who recently held the audience in Delhi spellbound with her rendition of Indian classical music*

The Week, New Delhi

*The best of both worlds on cello, The* Hindu, New Delhi

*Her instrument has a sound quality unmatched by any other string instrument* BroadwayBaby*,* Edinburgh

*Movingly Meditative*- New York Times

# Article from the Score magazine August 2017:

DUTCH MAESTRO WITH INDIAN CELLO : SASKIA RAO DE HAAS

After finishing one of her concerts in France, a couple walked up to **Saskia Rao de Haas** and told her about one of their friends who had been diagnosed with cancer. He had played Rao de Haas’s CD every day for one whole year. They told her that this man believed it was her music that cured him.

It’s easy for stories like this to go to one’s head, but the inventor of the Indian Cello holds to her heart a mantra that has allowed her to coax, from stubborn strings, lascivious-yet-punishing-yet-pensive tones: ***Patience. Reverence. Dedication. Discipline***. Speaking to her evokes the kind of tranquillity you would experience at the end of a sermon by Thich Nath Hahn; you are convinced that things are ripe for a positive transition.

Maestro Rao de Haas spent her childhood in a Dutch village at the border with Amsterdam with windmills and a river and cows dotting green fields. Her parents played the piano, her sisters the flute and violin. Her early training was under Maestro **Tibor de Machula** who took pains to emphasise the how basic scales and exercises fit into the florid manoeuvrings of concertos and sonatas. She experienced, with him, a technique characteristic of musical education in India: imitation. Rao would listen to him play, and instead of looking at the sheet music, would attempt to replicate him on the instrument. About a year after this began, it was discovered that could not read musical notations too well; she had been playing from memory the entire time.

Her introduction to the Indian classical oeuvre occurred through a recording of the **Dagar Brothers** that one of her teachers, professor **Rokus de Groot**, played in class. Rao found herself irreversibly seduced by its easeful cohabitation of contrasts: the sounds unfurling both rigid and free, earthly and esoteric.

Her work finds truth in this playful duality. When she weaves her harmonic way through the Raga Bhimpalasi, it is with a skill imbued with copious soul, with precise, distinguished beginnings that shimmer into swathes of sublime rushes which tap into multiple emotional responses.

Rao’s training under the revered **Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia** has allowed her to temper sensibilities fostered by traditional Western training. As artistic director of the Indian music program at the Rotterdam conservatory, he spent about 4 months a year taking classes in an intensively interdisciplinary curriculum which brewed a mosaic consciousness of melody: western art music, jazz music, popular music, tango, flamenco, Persian and Indian music, composition and music education. Rao assiduously attended his classes, and they crafted her perspective and practice. She absorbed his conception of music as meditation, worship and existential path. As revealed by the divinity he breathes into the *bansuri* (bamboo flute), his mastery is the consequence of a spiritual acquiescence to his sound, coupled with the “*practice regime of a former Soviet gymnast*”.

Rao’s own expertise honours both her roots in the West and her heart in India. She exemplifies this in the Indian Cello, an instrument of her own design. Born of “*the need to create a specific sound that was of a cello but with an Indian essence*”, it is modified with a high extra string, 10 sympathetic strings and tuning, as well as decreased size allowing for it to be played while sitting on the floor (in the way of the Indian classical practitioner).

The instrument emanates a tone that is sparse, polished but unpretentious, and in the hands of Maestro Rao, infinitely malleable. She wields it like Orpheus’ lute, causing a device born in 16thcentury Italy to sing the **Raag Vibhas** and **Miyan ki Malhar** with unabashed ease.

Maestro Rao de Haas’ artistry is grounded in culturally heterogenous soil. She applauds the benefit of having been educated with wildly opposing techniques prevalent in traditions of the West and India. “*Western teaching is all about encouraging to ask questions, to explore freely and to regard your teacher as a mentor whom you respect, but not as a distant unapproachable person…An Indian learning style is more bout surrender to the Guru who molds the student based his infinitely larger experience and knowledge. The student should do as he is told, since the Guru has his best interest in mind.  For that reason, he is not encouraged to question the guru*.” Her gurus pointed out the path that led her to glory, but left her curiosity untouched. Rao states that she has received the benefit of being given knowledge without being deprived of the right to question the knowledge being given:

*“There is no replacement for the guru shishya parampera, yet students should be encouraged to foster an inquisitive mind and be open to explore.****Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia****told me that my mission should be to create a style for the Indian cello. Not play like another instrument or vocal style.”*

The Indian Cello was built by **Eduard van Tongeren**, a Dutch lutier who has earned accolades for restoration of old, difficult and forgotten instruments. An electro-acoustic avatar of the cello has been created by French lutier **Alexandre Letellier**. Rao has designed five different models of the cello, most of which are used by her students.

Rao might have been initiated into the rich tapestry of classical music by her teachers, but much of the inspiration and experimentation emerges from her partnership with composer and sitar player **Pandit Subhendra Rao**, her husband since 2001. A protégé of **Pandit Ravi Shankar**, **Subhendra Rao** is known for his proficiency, prowess and extensive collaborations. Their classical *jugalband*i is a thing of joy, merging the gentle, sprightly, elusive meanderings of the sitar with the earthy sheaths of cello strings.

Their partnership extends beyond stage and home to entrepreneurship. The **Sangeet4Al**l curriculum was born out of their belief that all children are entitled to musical education that actually offers some merit. Currently serving about 12,000 children and 50 music teachers, it comprises “*an on the job professional development program for music teachers, effective musical games and activities, text books in the form of attractive picture books, songs, new small instruments, reading Indian music notation and flashcards*.” She calls it “*the science of teaching music in an Indian classroom*” as it takes care to incorporate classical Indian sensibilities into its structure.

Saskia Rao de Haas’ discipline is evident in a daily routine saturated with yoga and slow scales, care for her son, *riaz,* teaching, workshops, meetings, concerts, more *riaz* and working on the curriculum. She draws her persistence from her philosophy that hails music as imbued with “*the power to unite people and…let them experience intimately what it means to be one with…the sense that we are all one, all connected by a higher power…”* It has served her well, fostering a sound made unique not simply because of her skill in manipulating an instrument but in shaping an entirely new one.

For a world obsessed with definitions, discrimination and a superficial “advancement” at the expense of any lessons the past might have offered, Saskia Rao de Haas is a reminder of what might happen if artistic boundaries are relaxed, and the past is given a place at the table.